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Christine Campbell

Conference review

3rd Non-Monogamies and Contemporary Intimacies Conference

14th to 16th November 2019, Pompeu University, Ciutadella Campus, Barcelona

The Non Monogamies and Contemporary Intimacies Conference is a biannual meeting that took place in Lisbon, Portugal in 2015; Vienna, Austria in 2017; and most recently in Barcelona, Spain in November of 2019. The conference brings together researchers, activists and artists working in the diverse fields of non-monogamy, such as polyamory and swinging, and related areas.

I've been privileged to be on the International Organising and Scientific committees, and have a lot of affection for the organisation's members and aims so, full confession, this review is slightly biased. However, although I'm proud of my contribution, I don't have the responsibility of leading the conference forward. That mixed blessing is born by the excellent academic Dr Daniel Cardoso, currently Marie-Curie Research Fellow at the Manchester Metropolitan University. He was formerly at Universidade NOVA de Lisboa and was the driving force behind the inaugural conference there in 2015.

The history of the conference can actually be traced back to Hamburg and the 'International Conference on Polyamory and Mono-normativity', organised by Marianne Piper and Robin Bauer in November 2005. The 2015 Lisbon conference was arranged to mark the ten year anniversary of that original event. In the January 2018 issue of the Graduate Journal of Social Science, following the highly successful second conference in Vienna, a group six organisers, including Daniel Cardoso, spelled out the rationale for the conference:

"We felt that it was high time for another conference to be held in Europe, and even though we were acutely aware of the importance of entering and making these topics visible in other spaces, be them academic, activist or artistic, we also wanted to create a space where we did not have to start each and every intervention with a justification of the importance of this topic or with constant and redundant disclaimers about different kinds of non-monogamy...We wanted this conference to echo that first one – one where activists, artists and academics came together for three days, where LGBTIQ* people were very much represented, and where issues that are still relevant now (polyamory and neoliberalism, polyamory and responsibility, polyamory and the queer movement, etc.) were already being discussed."

Having attended all three NMCI events I can confirm that the conferences fully realise the original aims of those organisers. They provide a unique and special place for activists, artists and academics to share their ideas and practice, and feel nourished and inspired, ready to go back out into the mono-normative world.

Barcelona in 2019 brought hundreds of people together to the beautiful campus of Pompeu Fabra University. The programme began at 9.30 on Thursday with a welcome from the local organiser, Brigitte Vasallo and from then it was a blur of over fifty presentations and five keynote speakers as well as performances, exhibitions and installations.

The local organisers had chosen to have a large number of presentations in Catalan or Castilian. In their explanation of this decision they said that their intention was to recognise that, “our native languages are the space in which we learn to name ourselves, to relate to ourselves”. For me personally, this was frustrating, as a monolingual, a large swathe of the conference was barred to me. But of course, this helped me to challenge my privileged assumption that, as a native English speaker, I would be catered to. So maybe that was the biggest, if most unexpected, thing I gained from the conference.

I couldn't possibly review them all so I'll just concentrate on one session that had I really enjoyed. On Thursday afternoon, delegates were treated to a panel of four people speaking about “Polyamory as we get older”. The panellists were John Button, who runs the website honesterotica.com, from the UK; Linda Kirkman, a sex therapist from Australia; Tom Schnetlage, a retired software manager from the US, who is active in the poly community in Berkley; and Marlene Wasserman, a sex therapist and academic from South Africa. I was delighted to witness such a diverse and interesting group of people all on the same stage, let alone to hear them talking about an issue that is so relevant for many in the poly community. It was a beautifully curated discussion that covered facts and figures as well as personal experiences, all with an awareness and appreciation of the power and privileges at play. Marlene sharing her experiences from South Africa was particularly impactful. One of my tweets from the session reads, “Now John Button is talking about poly networks being there for you as you age. And now I'm welling up again. This is an academic conference. I shouldn't be crying. #nmci2019”.

But of course NMCI is much more than an academic conference. We saw performances from Grammo Suspect, an LGBT activist rapper from Kenya, we saw presentations from people talking about “Queering the care and caring the queer”, and we had keynotes from such luminaries as Meg-John Barker and Alex Iantaffi asserting that “Love isn't binary”.

The social events were suitably in keeping with the slightly anarchic atmosphere too. Saturday night saw a central Barcelona club, Sala Apolo, taken over by the conference. There were many performances, much wine was drunk, I can't actually remember too much about that night, in truth. All I know is, I had a great time.

The conference closed on Saturday with a confirmation of where the next NMCI will be held. To great delight it was announced to be Santiago, Chile. The final image from the conference is a group photo of all the delegates holding their hands over one eye, symbolic of the anti-government protests happening at the time in Chile. Those protests are still ongoing, as this piece goes to print Chileans are voting on whether to bring in a new constitution. I look forward to being there in 2021 and seeing what direction the country has taken and being a part of the wonderful community that is NMCI.

NMCI is diverse and exciting, in a way I've never experienced at other conferences and it's my absolute favourite on the conference calendar. Having said that, the BPS Psychology of Sexualities conference runs a close second!

En-Griffiths, D., Cardoso, D., En, B., Barker, M-J., Muscarina, S., & Pallotta-Chiarolli, M. (2018). Non-monogamies and contemporary intimacies: Editorial. *Graduate Journal of Social Science*, 14, 4–7.